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Soft Power with Chinese Characteristics: Promoting creative industries while maintaining political control

November 30, 2011 in [Op-Ed](#) by [The China Beat](#)

By Thomas Glucksmann-Smith

On October 15-18th 2011 during the [latest Plenary Session](#) of the 17th CPC Central Committee, China's leaders discussed ways to make China a 'culturally strong nation' (文化强国) and defined strategies to enhance China's international soft power. This meeting coincided with tax evasion charges laid against China's world renowned artist Ai Weiwei—charges he now plans to challenge.

Ai Weiwei, recently described by [Art Review](#) as the 'world's most powerful artist' would, in any other nation, be regarded as a perfect diplomat for his country's cultural industries. But, for China's CCP leaders Mr Ai's political activism and provocative behaviour has gone too far. Despite being responsible for the design of the Beijing Olympic Bird's Nest stadium he is now subject to surveillance and travel restrictions.

The heavy-handed treatment of such an influential artist hinders China's global image as an aspiring leader in the arena of cultural and artistic production. It runs directly counter to the international agenda for the cultural initiatives proposed at the recent sixth plenary session.

Popular blogger Han Han (韩寒) exposed the contradiction in the Central Committee's policy, writing at his blog on November 2nd 2011: "Even I, as a player in the world of culture, don't know how to write about building a culturally strong nation. So how can the members of the Polit-bureau who block search results for Li Bai on google, devise a plan to build a culturally strong nation?" This blog post has subsequently been [removed](#) as part of the regular censorial sweep.

The plan was unveiled at the Plenary Session, which designated the cultural industries as a pillar of the national economy. China's leaders are experimenting with various forms of ownership structure in order to advance technological and cultural innovation. They hope that market-produced cultural goods can be consumed domestically and exported abroad, while state organs will continue to have responsibility for providing essential public cultural goods and services.

To achieve their desired global cultural impact China's leaders identified four key areas in the cultural industries sector that need to be improved: research in philosophy and social sciences, the reputation of Chinese news media, the quality of literary and artistic works, and the development of a 'healthy' online culture (发展健康向上的网络文化). Yet, the recent detentions of global cultural icons like Ai Weiwei and Nobel Prize winner Liu Xiaobo suggests that the CCP's impulse will be to keep control over the content of these new, improved cultural products. Old socialist cultural work habits die hard.

And where does socialism fit in within the domestic and international soft power push?

In an opinion article in the [*People's Daily*](#), Ren Zhongping addresses the issue of promoting Chinese-style socialism in order to legitimise China's claims to a society that endorses 'Socialism with Chinese characteristics'. This point was heavily discussed at the meeting, with calls for a reintroduction of Marxist values in education and the need to disseminate Chinese socialism internationally. However, the banner of 'Socialism with Chinese characteristics' will certainly render China unsuccessful in its bid to exert soft power internationally and may well fall flat with domestic audiences too. Socialism as a political and cultural brand no longer carries the cache it once did to either audience.

Moreover, the notion of promoting an ideology with distinctly "Chinese characteristics" runs counter to the global operation of soft power as outlined by Joseph Nye (2004). According to Nye, success in exercising soft power involves the promotion of values and norms that have universal appeal and transcend cultural boundaries.

Yee-Kwang Heng (2010) uses this point to illustrate the disparity in soft power between China and Japan since the latter's government has been capitalizing on the popularity of its cultural goods in the international arena. Heng explains that Japanese anime and manga appeal to many people around the world as they offer culturally neutral characters, locations and narratives. Recent widely distributed Chinese films such as *Fearless* (霍元甲, 2006) and *Ip Man* (叶问, 2008) only offer non-Chinese audiences the spectacle of kung fu, since the narratives and settings are too culturally specific, xenophobic, nationalistic and lack the requisite levels of creativity for universal appeal.

Heng also places Japan at the forefront of global environmental protection and climate change research—a sphere that has international appeal and has consequently boosted the nation's soft power. So far China is infamous for its urban air pollution and rural environmental degradation as a result of local corruption, despite efforts by the state to promote conservation and alternative energy resources.

Regardless of these current deficiencies, Ren Zhongping celebrates the success of China's cultural achievements, claiming that the country's cultural sector has entered a "golden period of development" (黄金发展期). Ren cites the fact that China is the world's third largest film producer, the number one TV producer and the largest publisher of books. But the reality is that very few Chinese movies make any significant box office gains, Chinese TV is succumbing to greater government controls on content, Chinese News Media are propaganda devices and books are frequently banned in China on political or moral grounds.

Concerning soft power, Ren draws attention to the spread of Chinese culture internationally using the example of the 350 Confucius Institutes overseas and calls this the dawn of a "Chinese Cultural renaissance" (复兴曙光). Nevertheless, these Confucius Institutes require close scrutiny since some have been [accused of interfering](#) in the academic activities of universities on Taiwan and Tibet related issues. The fact that these Confucius Institutes claim to promote traditional Chinese culture under the auspices of the Communist government is not without irony, considering the anti-Confucian legacy of Mao and the Cultural Revolution (Louie, 2011).

The PRC leaders' claims to exclusive rights to 'represent' Chinese culture have also been long contested. Harvard academic Tu Wei-Ming argued in 1991 that the Chinese in Taiwan, Singapore and other diaspora communities have a greater claim to represent cultural China and to uphold the dignity of Chinese civilization than the brutal Marxist-totalitarian state. Tu's later [activities](#) in China suggest that he may be rethinking this position—although his reconciliation with China may reflect the nation's economic might rather than the effectiveness of its soft power.

With rampant consumerism and the relentless pursuit of material wealth apparent in China today it is hard to believe that promoting Marxist values or Chinese socialism will find broad traction among domestic audiences. Moreover, the success of Chinese culture abroad will need to be assessed across many dimensions that include the consumption of market produced cultural goods, the sources of Chinese cultural production and the way in which Chinese cultural discourse evolves beyond the control of ethnically Chinese communities. Examining the number of Confucius Institutes and the statistics for foreigners learning Chinese does not indicate the current success of Chinese soft power. Instead we could start by counting the number of people who visited Ai Weiwei's exhibit at the Tate Modern.

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